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Understanding and the Value of Intellectual Autonomy

Jesús Vega Encabo

Intellectual Autonomy and Its Value

We care about being intellectually autonomous. The Kantian admonition to "think for yourself" or "avoid undue influences on your intellectual life" is widely accepted. Something particularly valuable is lost in leading a life full of dependency on others, in not daring to be guided by our own judgment and criteria, and deferring to authorities (more or less socially recognized), in letting ourselves go and conform to certain social "pressures" to accept information and beliefs whose soundness is far from clear to us. There seems to be something distinctively valuable in becoming free of undesirable interferences and being able to govern oneself. Nevertheless, it is less clear what we do genuinely value in intellectual autonomy. Is intellectual autonomy intellectually virtuous?

A first way to answer these questions is to determine what the value of autonomy itself is, since intellectual autonomy probably shares the very same value. A first step along this road requires clarifying what we mean by autonomy. Joel Feinberg identifies autonomy with a (gradual) capacity, that of governing oneself, with the very condition of self-government and, therefore, with the virtue (or virtues) of that condition, with an ideal of character and with the sovereign authority of one who governs oneself (Feinberg, 1986). In addition, the concept of autonomy is multidimensional and polyhedral; this condition or the associated ideal can be interpreted as self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*), independence, self-government, self-determination, etc. And one can even stress different capacities and attitudes in the condition of being autonomous, such as the capacity for self-reflection or rational determination of one's own states, authenticity, integrity, etc.

I will start from a rather neutral conception of autonomy that is directly applicable in the intellectual realm. John Christman (2020) identifies two components in the notion of autonomy or self-rule: "the independence of one's deliberation and choice from manipulation by others, and the capacity to rule oneself." It is a minimal, but informative, characterization, since it seems to align - in the political arena - with the promotion of negative and positive liberties, and it has an apparent direct application to intellectual autonomy.

Intellectual autonomy refers to the capacity, condition, virtue, or ideal of someone who is in charge of her own intellectual life, for which (i) she must

exhibit a certain independence of thought, and (ii) a capacity for self-government.

- (i) The first component can be explained as follows: the person who holds the condition of being intellectually autonomous does not exhibit complete independence in intellectual matters, but rather an independence that prevents undue interference (influences that in the intellectual realm are analogous to coercion, domination or imposition). Besides, this independence manifests itself as a willingness not to defer to others except in appropriate circumstances; the cultivation of a virtue of intellectual autonomy teaches us how to determine which the appropriate circumstances are in each case by assessing the epistemic and intellectual situation in which one finds oneself.
- (ii) On the other hand, the capacity for intellectual self-government is more complex to gloss over. One option would be to identify it with the self-determination of a rational will, but - without appropriate qualification - this Kantian model is hardly applicable in the intellectual domain. Intellectual self-government seems to imply a willingness to exhibit rational authority over one's own decisions, actions, and attitudes in general, and govern one's own intellectual behavior according to the best reasons one recognizes.

Thus intellectual autonomy is a multi-faceted condition, ideal, or virtue. We admire in the intellectually autonomous person her independence of thought, which manifests itself in freedom from coercion and undue influence in the formation of belief, and her capacity for rational self-government, which is exhibited through a careful examination of the rational foundations of belief. In a sense, both conditions seek to ensure that one is in possession of one's beliefs and, in many occasions, that one can be held accountable for them.

Such a conception of intellectual autonomy seems to encourage the idea that its exercise promotes the acquisition of epistemic goods, at least in the sense of contributing instrumentally to the attainment of truth and knowledge. Some of the debates around the epistemic value of intellectual autonomy have assumed that the conditions of independence and self-government entail exhibiting self-reliance and manifesting a lack of trust in others as sources of rational belief or knowledge. But intellectual autonomy neither is nor implies self-reliance understood in the sense of depending exclusively or mainly on one's own epistemic resources in order to guide our intellectual behavior. Rather, it is compatible with accepting the word of those who are in better epistemic

positions and, above all, requires that we be in a position to delegate to others (and even devices and artifacts) many of the activities of monitoring and controlling belief, particularly those we are not able to carry out. True enough, insofar as our epistemic aims are obtaining the truth and avoiding error, excessively relying on our own epistemic resources could have unbearable costs, in terms of loss of truth (and knowledge). But we assume risks both by uncontrollably increasing our dependence on others and by inadequately restricting it when relying fundamentally on ourselves and our own capacities and resources. What a good epistemic performance requires is to find a balance in the negotiation of these risks of losing the truth or falling into error, and in many cases allow for a discharge of tasks and responsibilities in social environments where there are policies for the control of epistemic risks and for the distribution of the burdens of responsibility. If intellectual autonomy is indispensable and essential in finding this balance, it is yet to be established; in any case, our conception of autonomy cannot imply to renounce the epistemic goods that derive from participating in a space of strong epistemic dependencies in which our cognitive activities unfold.¹

Let's assume that intellectual autonomy is one dimension of the condition or ideal of an autonomous person. Thus, given that we value becoming autonomous individuals, with a disposition to avoid *excessive* dependence on others and with an ability to make one's own decisions and shape one's own life, then we value the same dispositions and capacities in the intellectual realm. This is the core of what I will call *quick arguments for the value of intellectual autonomy*.

This sort of argument would be decisive if we would have a good response to the question about the (nature and) value of autonomy as such. And obviously if we had a clear conception of what makes of intellectual autonomy a facet or a necessary dimension of autonomy. There are two ways of accounting for the value of autonomy: first, as determined by the value of the objects we choose and the goods that it makes possible; second, as something valuable for its own sake (Young 1982). Remember how J.S. Mill justifies the value of freedom of thought and autonomy. For him, both are constituents of happiness and well-being. Moreover, autonomy helps to shape a pattern of choices that make our life a unified whole we can be in charge of. As such, it is a constitutive feature of the good life and a component of our well-being. It is valuable to pursue autonomy as such because it is constitutive of our well-being.

¹ These remarks stress the compatibility between the ideal of intellectual autonomy and the epistemic dependence on others. For a defense of the compatibility, see for instance Roberts and Wood (2010). About epistemic dependence, see the introduction to a recent published issue in *Synthese* by Broncano-Berrocal and Vega-Encabo (2020).

On this idea, we can build a first quick argument for the value of intellectual autonomy:

1. Well-being is valuable for its own sake.
2. Autonomy (including intellectual autonomy) is a constitutive feature of well-being.
3. If (1) and (2), then autonomy (including intellectual autonomy) is a constitutive feature of well-being.
4. Autonomy (including intellectual autonomy) is a constitutive feature of well-being.
5. Intellectual autonomy is then valuable for its own sake.

In addition to the fact that it is far from obvious that there is necessarily an intellectual dimension to well-being (at least, many people would be happy by letting down a sustained engagement in intellectual activities), there is the more obvious fact that intellectual well-being could be acquired in many different ways. If so, why should the intellectual dimension of well-being *necessarily* involve intellectual autonomy? There seems to be the possibility of meeting many of our intellectual needs in conditions in which we renounce, at least partially, to autonomy. This is particularly so if we conceive of autonomy as self-reliance and reliance in our own resources and procedures. There are worlds in which the satisfaction of our intellectual needs and desires could be better achieved in conditions of strong dependence. For instance, let us suppose there is a paternalistic state that takes care of making easily available all the epistemic resources that allow the individuals to respond to their intellectual needs. The state (or a complex of institutional settings devoted to the task) is so careful and efficient in providing these epistemic goods that any individual is in a position to be satisfied regarding what they consider essential for their intellectual well-being. Only if we can show that autonomy itself is an intellectual good worth pursuing for its own sake, we can take it, for that very reason, as a necessary constituent of well-being. In other terms, we need to justify, first, why intellectual flourishing is one of the necessary aspects of human flourishing; and, second, why intellectual flourishing as such requires intellectual autonomy. One possibility is to hold, for example, that some epistemic goods cannot be constituted without meeting the conditions of being an autonomous intellectual being, and that these epistemic goods are essential to human (intellectual) flourishing.

A second quick argument for the value of intellectual autonomy reads as follows:

- (a) The value of autonomy (in general) derives from a demand of respect for the dignity of persons and, therefore, of self-respect.
- (b) If the value of autonomy (in general) derives from a demand of respect for the dignity of persons and, therefore, self-respect, then the value of intellectual autonomy does so as well.
- (c) Therefore, the value of intellectual autonomy derives from a demand of respect for the dignity of persons or self-respect.

The core of the argument lies in the intuition that abdicating our intellectual autonomy is a way of disrespecting ourselves in intellectual matters. It is the value that derives from our dignity as persons (and which should lead us to direct our own lives) that explains the value of intellectual autonomy. This is an interesting point, hard to deny. But the question that immediately strikes us is how does self-respect connect with what is valuable in the intellectual realm. What is epistemically valuable about self-respect?²

Both quick arguments, I dare to claim, have the same shortcomings: they leave it far from clear why exhibiting autonomy has any connection with epistemic value. They are not able to illuminate the links between the presumed value of autonomy and the values recognized in the intellectual domain. If we do not show respect for autonomy, in which sense are we losing anything of *epistemic* value? For instance, if we manifest a disposition to defer to authorities (not in the suitable circumstances, whichever they are), what could we lose in epistemic terms? And if we develop a strong disposition to outsource epistemic tasks to gadgets and devices, which epistemic loss is to be expected? (Ahlstrom-Vij 2016, Carter 2018, 2020). Does autonomy contribute to the promotion and constitution of something with *epistemic* value? In the next section, I propose a new starting point in order to address this question.

Autonomy and Agency

Autonomy implies self-government, the determination by oneself of one's own conduct. This idea can take on several meanings. And it is not clear which of them best illuminates what intellectual autonomy is and why it is valuable. I take a new start in this section by viewing autonomy as a condition of agency. As Hurka has argued in an illuminating paper (Hurka 1987), the ideal of autonomy

² I personally would be inclined to accept something as the following: self-respect entails a respect for the truth. It is not my objective to defend here such a thesis. It suffices with the following: an ideal of (intellectual) autonomy cannot be in conflict with the normative requirements of what makes of a belief an epistemically good belief.

is linked to our ideal of agency. That our actions exhibit agent autonomy consists in their being attributable to us. Of particular interest is Hurka's description of the ideal of agency. It is an ideal of causal effectiveness, of us playing a causal role in the world, guided by the ends we set ourselves and according to the choices we make. Autonomy is a matter of acting in the world, of making things happen. In the intellectual domain, it is about being able to determine one's own beliefs. It is about strengthening our cognitive contact with the world by searching for the truth.

One of the first advantages of considering autonomy from this ideal of agency is that it allows us to explain its value. We value autonomy because it contributes to increasing what a person achieves. Where there is capacity for choice, each time a choice is made one becomes responsible for multiple facts; therefore, the capacity for self-determination increases the capacity for agency, for success in intentional action. Hurka argues that this value is connected to a more general value of relation-to-the-world, and therefore also affects cognitive performances, at least those in which one determines whether one's belief conforms with how the world is.³ This connectedness to the world, in so far as is open to our determination, is certainly valuable to us. Otherwise, it would not make sense how we are deemed to be responsible for what we are capable of determining. The same is true in the intellectual realm where there seems to be many aspects open to our determination and agency.

A minimal reading of this idea applied to the intellectual realm supports the view that being intellectually autonomous consists in being in a position to form beliefs that are attributable to us. An epistemic agent is an autonomous epistemic agent. But on a more informative second reading, it is the exercise of our intellectual autonomy that facilitates intellectual achievements (such as knowledge and/or understanding) that otherwise would be off limits to us. The idea goes beyond the recognition that beliefs should be appropriately owned in order to be attributable to the doxastic agent; success that amounts to an epistemic achievement should also be attributable to the epistemic agent⁴. Intellectual autonomy is (epistemically) valuable to the extent that its exercise helps us bringing about such intellectual achievements. The argument goes as follows:

- i) Knowledge and/or understanding are intellectual achievements.
- ii) Intellectual achievements are epistemically valuable.

³ I do not think that this very idea requires being committed to doxastic voluntarism.

⁴ For this, see Carter (this volume).

iii) Intellectual autonomy contributes to or is exercised in these intellectual achievements.

iv) To that extent, intellectual autonomy is (epistemically) valuable.

An achievement is a success because of the exercise of one's abilities and competences: *a success because of ability*. An achievement is a success attributable to the competence of an agent. Success due to the competence of the agent excludes undue dependence on luck. In relation to the agent's aims, any attempt that achieves success by manifesting competence is (fully) attributable to the agent and deserves credit for this (Sosa 2007, 2011, 2015). Knowledge (and perhaps other epistemic statuses such as understanding) is an achievement. Knowledge consists in reaching the truth because of one's own abilities and competences and, therefore, attributable to the subject that exercises those cognitive abilities.

Achievements are distinctively valuable. We value them for their own sake⁵. We seem to prefer those situations where we achieve success by putting our abilities and competences into play to those where we are simply getting the result, even if a secure one. The idea has had a straightforward translation in the epistemic realm: epistemic normativity concerns how we carry out evaluations within a domain of human performance where there is success and failure. The value of achievements is not exhausted in the attainment of success (truth); it is mainly grounded on how the agent is involved through the exercise of their competences in obtaining the truth. Moreover, whatever it is the value of what is obtained, succeeding in the conditions of appropriate involvement of abilities inaugurates a normative dimension in which the very quality of the agency (in this case, epistemic) is what really matters.

This debate about what makes of an achievement something valuable impacts on the reading of premise i), because there are substantial divergences among epistemologists about which the specific achievements of the epistemic realm are. Is knowledge an epistemic achievement? In virtue of what? In virtue of a set of features that make it also valuable for its own sake? Or does it have final value in virtue of being a distinctive epistemic achievement? These disputes run

⁵ This is a very controversial idea, because it is difficult to establish what makes achievements distinctively valuable. I do not need a particular explanation of it in order to run the argument, beyond the fact that I have recorded above: our preference for success due to our involvement in bringing it about. This gets me away of Bradford's explanation of the value of achievements in terms of the difficulty in overcoming the obstacles in bringing something about (Bradford 2013) and gets closer to what Pritchard has dubbed a "general sense of achievement that captures the idea of a successful exercise of agential powers" (Pritchard 2010). This notion of achievement and its value does necessarily requires neither the overcoming of difficulties nor being the result of applying a significant or outstanding level of skill.

through much of contemporary epistemology, particularly among those that defend some version (weak or strong) of a theory of virtues (Pritchard 2010). For the moment, I am only interested in pointing out that in any of the versions we adopt there is at least one epistemic status -whatever it may be- that is identified as an achievement and whose value is explained by the very fact of being an achievement. Thus, however we settle these debates, premise i) would be correct in a way that makes also true premise ii), for it could be that only understanding (as Duncan Pritchard argues) is genuinely an intellectual achievement (and not knowledge) or it could be that both epistemic statuses can be explained according to the structure of achievements.

The version I favor says that it is enough for an achievement that it is due to the competence of the agent and not to luck, particularly if lucky cognitive success reflects a certain deficiency in the exercise of the competences that the agent puts into play (Sosa, forthcoming). Epistemic normativity is explained as a sort of telic normativity: we value the attainment of true beliefs due to competence. Our aims are framed by what we value in the exercise of agency: we strive for a life in which success be fully attributable to us as agents, as epistemic agents in this case. It is through these commitments that we inhabit a domain of epistemic evaluations; this domain requires a process of constitution of us as epistemic agents, that is, of constitution of subjects that manifest their competences in the obtaining of the truth and the avoidance of the error, and are capable of taking themselves as accountable for their performances. What we value: to secure that the obtaining of truth (or the avoidance of error) is due to us, that is, to be sufficiently involved in the task so that success be attributable to us. The epistemic normativity derives from this constitution of the domain and the subjects (Broncano-Rodríguez and Vega-Encabo 2011). The constitution of the epistemic agents in this sense requires them to be engaged in the epistemic domain as concerned by what is normative within it. A condition of being autonomous is to exhibit a concern with those normative features that are proper of each of the domains we participate in. Autonomous intellectual beings are those that manifest this concern and govern their cognitive tasks by what they take to be ends and values worth being pursued.

Understanding and intellectual autonomy

Arguments relying on the value of achievements to ground the value of intellectual autonomy need to account for whether and how intellectual autonomy contributes to the attainment and/or constitution of the achievement in question, be it knowledge or understanding. The idea that achievements are

dependent on the exercise of the subjects' agency does not, in itself, account for the contribution of intellectual autonomy to their promotion and constitution. It is true that there is a minimal sense in which agency, as we have characterized it, supposes a condition of autonomy of the subjects, that they are capable of engaging in cognitive tasks based on their appreciation of what are the values and norms at stake in the epistemic domain. But this minimal condition does not account for how the virtue of intellectual autonomy in its dimensions of independence and rational self-government contributes specifically to promote or constitute distinctively epistemic achievements. Without some clarity on this point, the condition of being an autonomous agent in its basic sense is, in general, applicable where there are achievements of any kind involved, and not grounded in any epistemic dimension of the assessments.

Understanding has been proposed as this kind of achievement that would ground the possible (epistemic) value of intellectual autonomy in virtue of contributing to its promotion and/or constitution. In recent epistemology, it is common to view understanding as a valuable intellectual achievement, perhaps the highest intellectual good that can be attained. Moreover, intellectual autonomy is also seen as that virtue which promotes the attainment of this epistemic good. This seems to suffice in order to establish the epistemic value of intellectual autonomy. Those virtues that contribute to the highest intellectual good are valuable and not in a merely instrumental sense; they contribute to the attainment of one of the highest goods in intellectual life in a virtuous way, that is, by manifesting the competences proper to the condition of being intellectually autonomous (Riggs 2003).

It is far from my purpose to get entangled in recent debates about the nature and value of understanding. In order to make full sense of the arguments that I will examine in this section, a few indications on the notion of understanding at stake will suffice. As is well known, there are several types of understanding that one can distinguish, for instance a holistic understanding of a field or an object or an explanatory understanding of why something is so. In what follows I will focus exclusively on this last type of explanatory understanding. There are also many disagreements about whether understanding is a kind of knowledge or whether it implies belief, truth, or justification. For my purposes, I will accept that there are cases in which understanding may well not be knowledge, but that there are others that constitute a particular kind of knowledge, a knowledge of why or the knowledge of causes, a kind of explanatory knowledge. Finally, I want to emphasize that understanding exhibits several features that make it a distinctive achievement. It is a way of grasping, with different degrees of correctness and depth, certain connections in reality in such a way that they take

on a new sense for the subject, being able to see the coherence between different representations or manifest certain (generally explanatory) abilities.⁶

Understanding is a cognitive achievement, perhaps the highest achievement in epistemic terms. Moreover, it is worth pursuing for its own sake as long as it constitutes such an achievement. But the question I am interested in exploring is how the condition of autonomy or the specific cultivation and exercise of the intellectual virtue of autonomy enters into the acquisition and constitution of such an achievement. In what sense is understanding the result of the manifestation of the virtue or virtues of intellectual autonomy?

(a) *Pritchard on "seeing for oneself" and intellectual autonomy*

Duncan Pritchard has explicitly linked the value of intellectual autonomy to the value of understanding or, better, to a general category of "seeing for oneself," which includes both a form of "active perceptual seeing for oneself" and a form of "active intellectual seeing for oneself" or understanding. In his terms, seeing things for oneself, as manifested in understanding, "serves what is claimed to be a fundamental good: intellectual autonomy" (Pritchard 2016b, 29). He goes on to explain the value of seeing things for oneself in the following terms: "[t]his value is ultimately rooted in the role that seeing it for oneself plays in the promotion of intellectual autonomy and, thereby, a virtuous life of flourishing" (Pritchard 2016b, 40). Pritchard accepts as a starting point the intuition that there is an "epistemic improvement" in seeing things for oneself versus relying on others, on their testimonies or on their abilities in general. He wonders, I think rightly, if there is not some kind of epistemic fetishism on our part in doing that. Seeing things for oneself, in all its versions, is a manifestation of intellectual virtue, and he offers three lines of argument to account for its value. Surprisingly, none of them points to what makes "seeing things for oneself" or "understanding" *epistemically* more valuable, i.e., to the sort of epistemic improvement involved.

The first argument is based on a premise that is difficult to dispute: that an appropriate guide to the intellectually good is how one carries out the assessment of what is considered a well-conducted inquiry. Pritchard argues that inquiry is often assessed in terms of whether understanding is achieved and not just truth or knowledge. This alone does not show that understanding is more valuable than knowledge or in what sense. Nor does it give any clue as to how it connects

⁶ The nature and value of understanding has been widely discussed in recent literature. See for review Gordon (2017), Hannon (forthcoming).

with the cultivation of intellectual autonomy unless it simply reflects the fact that *it is oneself that makes* this perceptual and intellectual seeing.

In Pritchard's view, knowledge can be enough to close inquiry. But *sometimes* knowledge from understanding seems to be required. If so, he has to argue that in these cases it would not be legitimate to close inquiry without achieving understanding: there would be something epistemically valuable that we would deprive ourselves of that makes it illegitimate to close inquiry before obtaining it. But where does this demand for understanding come from, and in what sense would we be less virtuous not to satisfy it? Pritchard is well aware that it cannot be a normative demand for epistemic subjects to have to close inquiry only when a state of understanding is attained. Again, what is epistemically defective in closing inquiry before reaching understanding? It cannot be an absolute and unconditional demand. Therefore, among the virtues of the intellectual being, there must be the capacities that contribute to determine which epistemic demands must govern the inquiry at every moment (Pritchard 2016b, 35).

I would suggest that this is one of the specific contributions of intellectual autonomy to epistemic life. Take notice that this does not mean the promotion of understanding in particular. Cultivating intellectual autonomy would serve to evaluate the epistemic demands in each case; it would promote the acquisition of dispositions to determine whether the epistemic situation is adequate, to determine whether the means at one's disposal are sufficient given the normative requirements involved at each point, etc. For example, the intellectually autonomous subject would assess whether he should close the investigation with the resources at his disposal or he has to defer to the competences of others, with a view to satisfying such or such epistemic desiderata. She will assess whether it is worthwhile for such and such a case of inquiry to advance towards understanding and how it would be epistemically more appropriate to acquire it. At each point the question of whether is better in epistemic terms to proceed towards understanding will be raised and assessed. Besides, this is an issue that could require more than assessments in exclusive epistemic terms.

The second argument aims to establish the final value of understanding on the basis that understanding is what Pritchard calls a strong cognitive achievement, an attainment of the truth that involves significant levels of skill and the overcoming of intellectual obstacles. He stresses the active and conscious integration of relevant items of information in contrast with more *dependable* ways of grasping the truth. However, one could agree that understanding is an achievement that demands a particular effort and high level of skill without accepting that success in the enterprise be in itself due to the particular

manifestation of intellectual autonomy. We have already pointed out that dependence as such does not cancel the agency of subjects or the consecution of epistemically significant achievements. Moreover, strong cognitive achievement may require multiple and diverse abilities acting together, some of them constituted in conditions of dependence.

The last argument seeks to make even more explicit the connection between autonomy and understanding. Pritchard gives it a particular conviction. Understanding *manifests* intellectual virtue. The value of understanding is grounded in manifesting virtue, and virtues have ultimate value, at least insofar as they play a role in human flourishing. The virtue associated with understanding is intellectual autonomy and, therefore, part of the virtuous life of human flourishing. But, couched in these terms, this is just another version of our quick argument for the value of intellectual autonomy. It does not make explicit the distinctive form of epistemic evaluation that is at stake.

At other places, Pritchard has defended that truth is the fundamental epistemic good, in particular, “grasping the truth” (Pritchard 2014, 2016a). How could this idea fare with understanding being highly valuable? First, nothing excludes that understanding, as an achievement, also had non-epistemic (ethical) value. Second, the difference in epistemic value can be expressed in terms of greater degrees of grasp of the truth. Understanding involves “a deeper and more comprehensive grasp of the truth” (Pritchard 2016a). It is not an issue about deeper and more comprehensive *truths*, whatever this could mean. It is the grasp itself that qualifies as deeper. If so, we seem to aim not merely at truth, but also at *grasping* the truth in a distinctive way. It looks as if the grasping itself would do the job and becomes the aim in our attempts.

Nonetheless, what is the role of the virtue of intellectual autonomy in the pursuit of this goal? Pritchard suggests that this distinctive grasp of the truth is a sort of active seeing for oneself. First, “seeing it by yourself” is not a condition derived from the exercise of intellectual autonomy, even of self-reliance in its more stringent version; it is just a peculiarity of the grasp involved. Second, since the point of the argument is to rescue the epistemic dimension in valuing understanding, the crucial question is then whether the way the grasp is attained has anything to do with its correctness. In other words, Pritchard owes us an explanation of why it is that by aiming at this sort of a deeper and more comprehensive grasp it is correctness that is attained. Again, why is the correctness involved only secured in conditions in which we manifest intellectual autonomy?

b/ "Coming to understand"

Michael P. Lynch (2014, 2016, 2017) has also explored this connection between understanding and intellectual autonomy, though in a more indirect way. Lynch takes understanding as a particularly valuable kind of knowledge by which we grasp the relationships of dependence between states of affairs. In addition, he offers a functional characterization of understanding that is particularly distinguished by its etiology and consequences. Lynch puts special emphasis on the etiology of the state of understanding: it is constitutive of understanding that be "caused" by an active cognitive act of grasping dependency relationships. "Grasping" is a constitutive act of a previous act of "coming to understand" without which there is no genuine understanding. It is an active mental act, which requires effort and conscious attention. Moreover, Lynch conceives it as a creative act of imaginative integration of different items fitting together. This point is especially important, since these are the features that explain the special value of understanding and motivate our desire to become intellectually autonomous beings. "Coming to understand" is something I must do for myself; therefore, it cannot be transmitted directly through testimony, nor can it be outsourced (Lynch, 2016). The sources of the value of understanding are the effort (proper to cognitive achievements) and the creative dimension of the act of coming to understand.

A characterization that insists on an etiology of understanding of this kind excludes almost by definition that we can acquire understanding by relying on external sources. I consider, however, that there are in fact cases in which one could acquire understanding through the testimony of others. It is at least controversial that this cannot happen, as D. Whiting (2012) or Malfatti (2019) among others have argued. Lynch's etiological characterization excludes it. Testimony can serve as a basis for the subject to come to understand, but ultimately the testimonial basis is not the act of understanding itself that requires the creative activity of the individual's mind. In fact, this means that no genuine epistemic dependence is constituted in the reliance on external sources, that is, that the possibility of *achieving* anything of value is excluded once we depend on the epistemic contribution of others to the formation of the belief. Of course, this coming to understand implies the development of certain skills, experience and interaction with the world (including others), but it is first and foremost an act that I must perform on my own and that cannot be deferred.

If understanding is an achievement, it is so by virtue of the act of "coming to understand", of a specific active effort of the epistemic subject. Therefore, the achievement would seem to be primarily linked to grasping the very relationships

of dependence and not so much to the truth that one grasps, since the relevant epistemic basis could be in the person who, for example, offers the testimony whose basis is crucial for understanding such a truth or connection between true propositions. This act of grasping is an achievement in itself, close to what Grimm would call subjective understanding (Grimm 2012). Getting things right could be due to the correctness of the information provided by others, but the grasping itself as constitutive of my subjective understanding is due to my distinctive cognitive abilities, by "putting things together" in such a way that strikes me as right. But if there is achievement here -as it could be an achievement to obtain a justified belief- it is not as such the achievement of knowledge itself (or knowledge from understanding).

"Coming to understand" seems to be a particular case of "coming to believe", one with a peculiar phenomenology. On the one hand, one could express doubts that the understanding has to be preceded by a specific psychological act; we could not only manifest understanding without it being accompanied by a specific phenomenology, maybe because it is more implicit than explicit. On the other hand, why should this mark a strong difference with other "acts" of coming to believe, for instance, those that are preceded by taking a deliberative stance and in which we are normatively engaged as agents in the fixation of belief for reasons? This is something that I must do for myself in the very same sense in which I "come to understand" by integrating items of reliable information. The "act" itself cannot be deferred, how could it? It is clear to me that this is not what is at stake in the debates about the value of understanding and intellectual autonomy.

For Lynch, the creative dimension of the act also makes a difference. Again, this is not enough to endow understanding with a particular epistemic value. First, it is hard to see how "creativity" as such –even if valuable for its own sake- can be a condition for obtaining knowledge from understanding. Either we must deflate what is taken as "creative" in order to allow for modest acts of understanding or we must accept that there are ways to come to non-creative understanding.

The value of understanding derives both from being a cognitive achievement and from the active and creative involvement of the subjects. Regarding the first feature, we have seen that it is not necessary that the correctness of the belief itself be due to (or explained through) active personal involvement in the very act of grasp. Regarding the second feature, creativity helps explaining at least one aspect of the value of understanding, an aspect that is not separable of intellectual autonomy in so far as it involves personal acts of expression. This is why, even if we could outsource understanding, it would not be desirable. Value

again is attached to intellectual autonomy in terms of what makes us human, not in terms of what is epistemically better, or so Lynch seems to accept in *The Internet of Us* (Lynch 2016).

c/ Understanding, intellectual autonomy, and epistemic competences

In the first chapter of *Epistemic Explanations*, E. Sosa explores the nature of a particular kind of epistemic achievement: the understanding of why something is thus-and-so and first-hand knowledge of why it is. Sosa asserts that there are certain issues that demand that epistemic agents do not settle them through deference to others but significantly through the exercise of their own competences⁷. This is true at least in all those matters where "rational appreciation" is at stake; they are matters that could not be adequately settled by consulting others. One's insight and understanding of the issues must be the guide in forming the belief, and no possible deference can properly close the deliberation or settle the matter. In other words, it would be epistemically inappropriate to defer in these matters, even if deference to others might provide us with true, reliable beliefs, knowledge, and also some form of understanding. This last will be "truncated," Sosa suggests.

I am going to assume that the acquisition of this first-hand knowledge implies the manifestation of a virtue that we have traditionally identified as intellectual autonomy. Sosa, in several passages in his work, insists on the special value we place on intellectual autonomy, without which we would be unable to put in its proper place what other sources, including testimony, might deliver us. This idea is aligned with a very traditional conception of intellectual autonomy that encourages us to cultivate a certain independence of thought and to exercise a capacity for rational control of our own epistemic behavior.

Let us briefly review the options we have for including intellectual autonomy within the framework of virtues in Sosa's epistemology. In his most recent works, Sosa addresses epistemic normativity as a special case of telic normativity. Assessments are relative to aims, and attempts are thus assessed in terms of getting or not the respective aims. As achievements in general, the highest level of normativity is characterized as success that is fully attributable to the agent (Sosa 2015, 2017, forthcoming). First, achieving truth by manifesting competence constitutes the epistemic/normative status of aptness. Second, achieving aptness by manifesting competence constitutes the

⁷ Sosa talks for instance of questions in the humanistic domains (moral, aesthetic, etc.).

epistemic/normative status of full aptness. These are achievements relative to the respective cognitive aims of truth and aptness.

Nonetheless, when exhibiting intellectual autonomy is required, it seems as if the aim should be subtly different; in this case, it is a matter of achieving "first-hand knowledge in search of understanding" (Sosa, forthcoming). Is this a different kind of aim in our intellectual endeavors? It does not seem so; it is aptness again, but obtained under certain constraints derived from what is the manifestation of the intellectual virtue of autonomy, that is, "without the aid of deference", "not by means of mere deference", mainly by bringing into play one's own competences (Sosa, forthcoming). In other words, the aim is to judge *autonomously* by mobilizing one's own competences. One might ask what this achievement normatively adds within the epistemic domain in comparison with obtaining fully apt beliefs in conditions in which we do defer to others.

One possibility would be to hold that testimony, as a paradigmatic case of obtaining beliefs by relying on others, provides knowledge but not full knowledge; and in the same way it could provide understanding, but not full, only truncated understanding. However, this line of argument does not seem to be available to Sosa, since in testimonial contexts we can aim at aptness and acquire fully apt beliefs through deference, insofar as our assumptions about the competences of others and ourselves are correct and we get the truth due to the manifestation of competences and due to the correctness of such assumptions. But Sosa seems to share an image of testimony according to which it can hardly as such contribute to *constitute* the characteristic epistemic status of understanding, this first-hand knowledge of why something is thus-and-so. Testimony plays the role of a conduit of reasons, but does not constitute reasons as such, reasons that we have made "our own".

I cannot but agree that manifesting a disposition to avoid those conditions in which one might be deprived of reasons and a willingness to constitute the normative considerations for or against belief as reasons one possesses (an aspect of rational self-government) is an essential aspect in determining whether an agent exhibits the conduct of an intellectually autonomous being. What I consider hard to see is whether this can be taken as an indicator that a new dimension of telic assessment is here involved. Is a higher and more admirable achievement? Why is it of greater *epistemic* quality? Or is it a demand derived from the normative aspiration to full agency, an aspiration that can only be satisfied when *one's own* competences are put into play?

A new distinction in Sosa's work could help here. Let us admit that there is something epistemically valuable in exhibiting intellectual autonomy. It is a

virtuous trait of epistemic agents. Sosa distinguishes two forms of epistemic normativity. The first one is proper of gnoseology and tries to answer questions about the constitution of the status of knowledge in our cognitive performances. The second one, under the name of intellectual ethics, deals with normative evaluations in a broader sense related to intellectual issues in general and to how to conduct our inquiries. The first one is completely isolated from practical considerations (it is a kind of purely epistemic telic normativity); the second one lets in (and often requires) considerations of a practical nature and allows non-telic evaluations (see Sosa, Forthcoming). This does not mean, or at least this is what Sosa wants, that there is not a purely epistemic dimension of intellectual ethics, which is identified once the other issues and evaluations of a practical nature are put into brackets (Sosa, 2015).

In parallel with this distinction, Sosa includes two different sort of virtues in his universe of virtues and competences: first, those whose manifestation constitutes knowledge and, second, those that help, promote or foster epistemic goods insofar as they put us in a position to know, but do not manifest themselves in the attainment of these goods. To which of the two categories does intellectual autonomy belong?

If a constitutive virtue of epistemic achievements (let's say the kind of understanding we are considering), intellectual autonomy would contribute to grounding the success of the particular attempts of the cognitive agent. The idea is that there is a more admirable epistemic achievement that can only be constituted through the exercise of the virtue (or virtues) of intellectual autonomy. In what sense is it more admirable in epistemic terms? Which is the sort of improvement in epistemic quality here involved? In Sosa, two souls coexist: on the one hand, the epistemic improvement has to consist in an increase in reliability; on the other hand, the quality of the agency is also a function of the attributability of the achievements. True enough, it does not seem that an increase in reliability necessarily results from the manifestation of the virtue of intellectual autonomy (Kornblith 2014). At most, we can say that is the attributability that is reinforced, to the extent that full knowledge is acquired under those conditions in which the epistemic agent is able to own the reasons that ground the epistemic status of the belief. In principle, this does not prevent that an agent sometimes manifests a certain incompetence by not deferring to others, to an authority in the matter, even though this may not constitute a first-hand achievement. But I wonder whether, once the aim of the attempt is to achieve understanding by oneself, we are not already incurring the obligation *not to defer to others*. That is, it is not just that we are not obliged to defer in these cases; it is rather that we seem to be obliged *not to defer*, even if that implies that

the issue remains unsolved or unsettled. Our problem again is that it is not obvious what makes this advisable in epistemic terms. I cannot but agree that determining under what conditions the acquisition of epistemic achievements could be affected by *undue deference* is certainly a function of exhibiting a certain independence and autonomy. Nonetheless, it is also an aspect of the exercise of autonomy to determine under what conditions we should abandon such independence -in its most restrictive sense- and be ready to defer to others. Being able to do this properly can put us in a position to know or to achieve understanding.

If so, it might be more appropriate to accept that the virtue of intellectual autonomy, and the complex of dispositions and attitudes that accompany it, is rather part of the group of virtues that Sosa, already in 2015, called auxiliaries, a kind of agential virtues that puts one in a position to know. Intellectual autonomy, arguably, is an essential component of our intellectual ethics. But there is at least one aspect in which cultivating the virtues and competences that allow us to put ourselves in a position to know is subordinated to the aims of the epistemic domain, since they must contribute to ensuring that the quality of the epistemic agency - at its different levels and degrees - is not affected or diminished. Again, the attributability of success is central. Auxiliary competences would reinforce the conditions under which, if one were to affirm, one would achieve success, or achieve it with sufficient reliability or aptness. They could help to avoid recklessness and negligence in forming beliefs by securing the mobilization of one's own skills in the appropriate situation and shape. They could help us to assess if one is in a position to know given the competences and the conditions of their exercise. They would thus contribute to securing the triple-S profile (Skill, Shape, Situation) of the competences.

One way of expressing the contribution of this kind of virtues/competences to (epistemic) full agency is to recognize in them the dispositions of the agent to monitor the conditions of exercise of one's own competences and, therefore, the epistemic situation in which they are exercised. Sosa calls this function "putting oneself into perspective". Only in this way can we shape and own our own intellectual world. I would dare to claim that here lies the specific contribution of the dispositions that we attach to the virtue of intellectual autonomy. They help us to assess whether, and when, one is in a position to know and to assess the risks associated to the exercise of one's own competences. In order to secure these assessments, being intellectually autonomous requires of the epistemic agent to exhibit authority over important aspects of her own cognitive life, being able to shape her own intellectual world and epistemic identity. Our epistemic identities reflect how we normatively

engage in our cognitive endeavors, which ends we value, which risks are we disposed to take, how we respond to changing (contextual) standards, etc. What we value in intellectual autonomy is a function of what we value in the epistemic identities we ourselves contribute to shape. But this is not tied anymore to the constitution or promotion of specific epistemic aims (or goods), such as understanding, but to an aspiration to perfect our own agency. This is not a distinctively *epistemic* aspiration, it is a normative demand that is rooted in general features of our nature of autonomous agents. In the end, some version of the quick argument for the value of intellectual autonomy will prevail.

Conclusion

Our question was about the value we assign to the condition of being autonomous and to the cultivation of a certain virtue of intellectual autonomy that we manifest in our cognitive endeavors. Autonomy is fundamentally about agency and to that extent it is a constitutive aspect of intellectual life because of its contribution to obtain more and more epistemic achievements. The value of intellectual autonomy is also rooted in the value that is attributable to the epistemic achievements it helps to promote. That there is a closer link between the pursuit of understanding and exhibiting intellectual autonomy is a point that several recent arguments have highlighted. But none of these arguments are able to account for what is distinctively epistemically valuable without at the same time accounting for the value of autonomy in general. In other words, what brings autonomy into play is the ability of epistemic subjects to normatively engage in cognitive tasks. As an ideal, autonomy (and intellectual autonomy) translates into an aspiration for perfection of our agency. Further, to be a full agent is inseparable from how one governs one's behavior in response to what matters to one normatively, what one considers good to do. Agency therefore implies a way of engaging in normative tasks in which one takes oneself as the source of normativity.

On the other hand, this aspiration is grounded on the cultivation and exercise of certain capacities, which are linked to how we shape ourselves our own epistemic identity. As intellectual beings who aspire to make their agency complete, we cannot help but see and value ourselves as beings who engage in epistemic inquiry under a certain conception of what is important to us. Our epistemic identities reflect a set of dispositions and attitudes toward oneself and others in relation to how to evaluate situations where the epistemic ends that matter to us are at stake. The exercise of these capacities is neither a necessary condition nor

a guarantee that a certain epistemic status, be it knowledge or understanding, is constituted as an achievement as such. Intellectual autonomy matters, however, because it is the way in which we respond to what is epistemically valuable in shaping our own intellectual world.

The value of intellectual autonomy is intimately linked to what is valuable in building and preserving our own epistemic identities, for they reflect our own evaluations as aspects of the aspiration for full agency. To accept this idea is to assume, at the same time, that the respect due to intellectual autonomy must be preserved even if it might lead to epistemic identities that are defective, that do not actually contribute to placing us in a position to know. It calls for respect for how each person builds her own epistemic identity in virtue of the value derived from the very exercise of one's rational powers (Cholbi 2017). This is so because, in the end, the value of autonomy, also of intellectual autonomy, is inseparable from how one is willing to constitute something like one's own reasons together with others who recognize them and even contribute to strengthen and guarantee them. In the face of recognizable epistemic defects, the recipe is rational persuasion, not coercive correction; in other words, they demand a more complete intellectual autonomy, that there be no undue influence and that one exhibit a certain rational authority, which we can only do in adequate spaces of interlocution⁸.

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